now viewed as either material necessities, functional, or infrastructure. Mostly, though, they gesture, hopefully and often joyfully, at a time-space of "after."

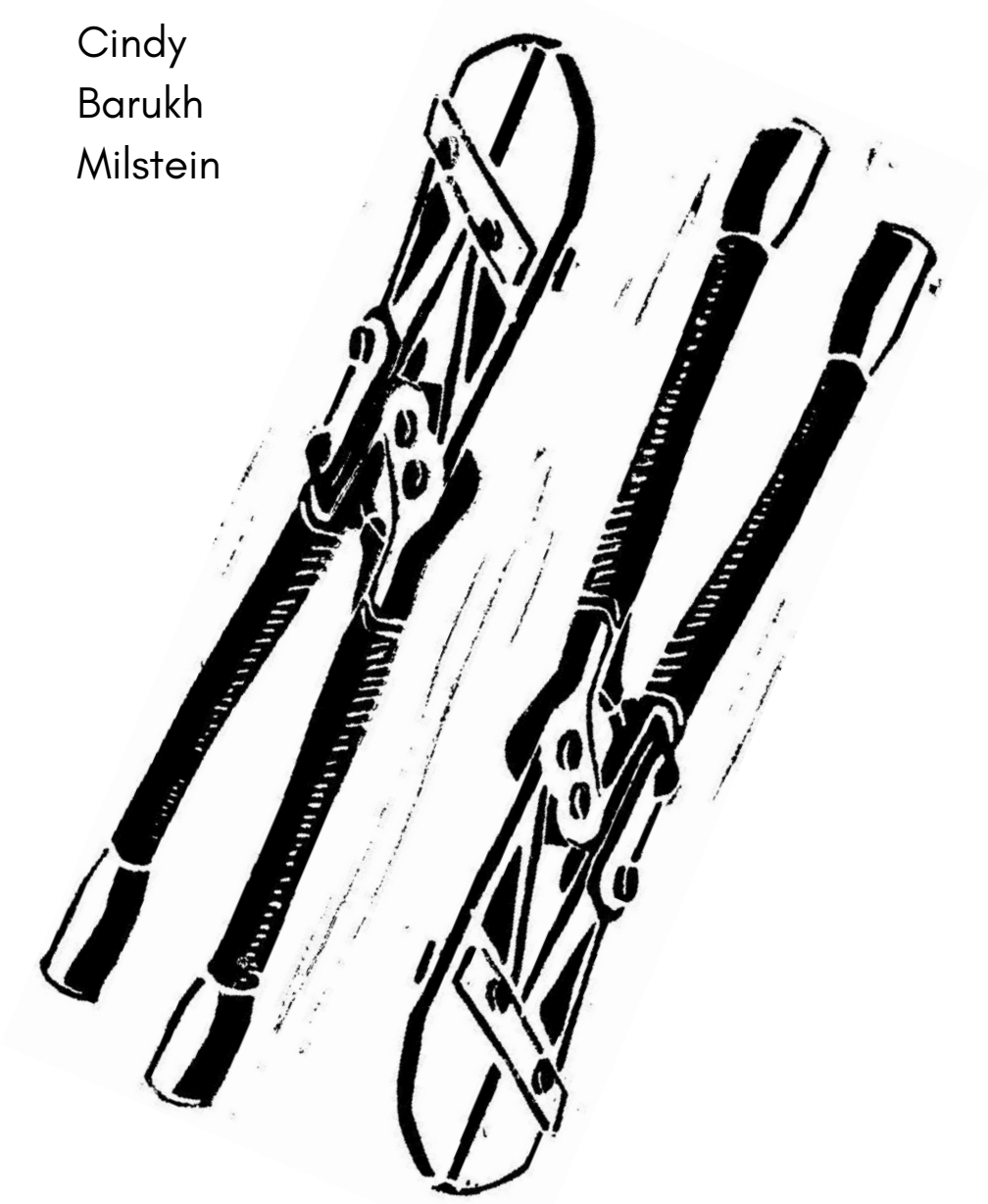
What would such a time-space beyond hierarchy, domination, and exploitation look like, and what of an anarchist art then? That is something we need to dream up together, through our various acts of imagining, debating, fighting for, and deciding on that ever-dynamic time-space.

In the meantime, in this present awful time-space, I dream of an art that agitates even as it unmasks injustices; that educates even as it inspires; that organizes even as it models self-governance. That surprises and provokes, sometimes upsetting a few carts in the process, and that isn't identifiable as anarchist art by its look but instead by its sensibility. I long for a nonhierarchical aesthetic that isn't afraid of instituting imagination as a public good, which can also stand up to public involvement and interrogation as well as directly democratic decision-making. That has an unending commitment to the notion that through creative expression, humans achieve a qualitative self- and social recognition that can, by breaking through the alienation we experience today, point toward self-determined social relations — not wealth or fame, but knowing that we are fully seen by and see others, "warts and all," as we shape a world of beauty together, all the while defining "beauty" by what upholds values such as cooperation, dignity, love, freedom, and other anarchistic ethics.

To hell with cardboard! Let's utilize whatever artistic mediums are necessary, toward endless, plastic possibilities in societies of our own, ongoing collective creation. That would be beautiful indeed.

REAPPROPRIATE THE IMAGINATION!

Cindy
Barukh
Milstein



NOTE

If this zine sounds dated in places, that's because it was originally published some eighteen years ago in Josh MacPhee and Erik Reuland [Ruin], eds., *Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2007), 296-307. Still, I think this essay's challenge to reappropriate the imagination makes renewed sense under these christofascist times.

Also, if you like this piece, you can find more of my individual and curated zines as PDFs at https://itsgoingdown.org/author/cindy-milstein/ and https://www.sproutdistro.com/, both of which contain all sorts of other anarchistic offerings, thanks to the good folks who keep both websites going strong. All of my zines can always be shared freely and widely. I've also done numerous books — all labors of love on my part — which you can find by searching my name online or at your favorite rad bookstore.

Last but not least, big shoutout to Amanda Priebe for the cover art, freely available at justseeds.org, and Casandra (www.houseofhands.net) for kindly turning my design and layout into PDFs.

August 2025

And in one final example, in summer 2006, CampBaltimore, in a surprising collaboration with the Contemporary Museum of Baltimore, encouraged people to debate urban design through the lens of social justice while building a network to transform art and society. According to an anarchist who participated in the project, CampBaltimore built "a trailer that could serve as a mobile convergence center," which included "a small infoshop, a place from which to serve meals, a mobile sewing workshop, and a place to do film screenings" within neighborhoods. Another part involved "Headquarters: Investigating the Creation of the Ghetto and the Prison-Industrial Complex," housed in the museum. Here, "blurring the lines between the practices of artists and activists," the museum also became "an infoshop and center of operations: a platform for activities that investigate Baltimore's program of uneven urbanism and a site to mobilize for local and global struggles." "It's not like a traditional model of political activism or artistic models of political activism. It's both — and [it's] trying to offer an alternative way, seeing other ways, ... grappling with the evaporation of public spaces in the city and the privatization of everything," explained a museum artist-in-residence. Rather than art on the walls, then, "Headquarters" featured short videos documenting grassroots struggles in Baltimore, a dry-erase map of the city that people could write on, a flowchart outlining socioeconomic interconnections, a mini library, and a meeting space, among other things. The trailer and museum became platforms for people to think and converse about their city — and hopefully change it.

In these instances and others, there is a sense of attempting to engage with the complexities of the present, and via a process of art-as-dialogue, working together to both critique and reconstruct our lived public places. Such imaginative projects indicate that centrally planned forms — whether capitalist, fascist, or socialist — cannot build a dailyscape that speaks to who we are and want to be. And that there also needs to be an integration — or reintegration in many cases — of what is now seen as art into those things

"official" stroll is a privately funded annual event designed to lure holiday shoppers to the "historic streets of downtown" by creating a "magical stage" peopled by the Victorian upper crust; the "unofficial" version "gave a presence to those whose labor built the city by dressing in Victorian-era working-class apparel and performing a period-inspired strike during the event." Many of the bystanders as well as the participants, though, couldn't tell the difference, and the full history of nineteenth-century Troy was reinserted into the public imagination. As one of the artists involved with this project remarked, "It was a collective intervention into public memory and Christmas shopping." Certainly, "by making visible the class and labor struggles of the era," this interventionist art piece "obliquely points out the city's motives to present a selective history conducive to consumption," as *Shopdropping* observed. But it also cleverly and clearly transforms the "Whose Streets? Our Streets!" of protest moments into a tangible lesson played out in the actual historical space — potentially sparking civic dialogue and action around contemporary injustice.

In a much more expansive effort in April 2001, the three-day Department of Space and Land Reclamation campaign involved sixty mostly illegal reclaimings of public space in Chicago, thereby explicitly linking artistic expression to vibrant conversations and decentralized self-management in the city's many distinct neighborhoods. As the weekend's catalog noted,"Artists/activists/radical citizens have once again found common ground" in multiple practices that "all resist the encroachment of top-down centralized control and private capital. Projects of reclamation situate the producer at a critical intersection of power." A central headquarters, open around-the-clock during the campaign, was designed "to connect various practitioners of reclamation as well as initiate a critical dialogue about the building of a radical aesthetic/arts movement in Chicago and beyond."

An art exhibit, albeit a small one, is always housed in the bathroom of a coffeehouse in my town. A recent display featured cardboard and paper haphazardly glued together, and adorned with the stenciled or hand-lettered words of classical anarchists such as Mikhail Bakunin and Errico Malatesta. The artist's statement proclaimed, "I am not an artist"; the show offered only "cheap art," with pieces priced at a few dollars. Undoubtedly the materials came from recycling bins or trash cans, and perhaps this artist-who-is-not-an-artist choose to look the quotes up in "low-tech" zines.

There is something heartwarming about finding anarchist slogans in the most unexpected of places. So much of the time, the principles that we anarchists hold dear are contradicted at every turn, never discussed, or just plain invisible. And thus seeing some antiquated anarchist writings scribbled on makeshift canvases in a public place, even a restroom, raised a smile of recognition.

But only for a moment; then despair set in. Why is anarchist art so often a parody of itself, predictable and uninteresting? Sure, everyone is capable of doing art, but that doesn't mean that everyone is an artist. And yet it is generally perceived as wrong in anarchist circles that some people are or want to be artists, and others of us aren't or don't want to be. Beyond the issue of who makes works of art, why can't art made by antiauthoritarians be provocative, thoughtful, innovative — and even composed of materials that can't be found in a dumpster? More to the point, why do or should anarchists make art at all today, and what would we want art to be in the more egalitarian, nonhierarchical societies we dream of?

This I know: an anarchist aesthetic should never be boxed in by a cardboard imagination.

POINTING BEYOND THE PRESENT

The name of one radical puppetry collective, Art and Revolution, aptly captures the dilemma faced by contemporary anarchist artists. It simultaneously affirms that art can be political and that revolution should include beauty. Yet it also underscores the fine line between art as social critique and art as propaganda tool. Moreover, it obscures the question of an anarchist aesthetic outside various acts of rebellion. It is perhaps no coincidence at all, then, that Art and Revolution's logo design echoes the oft-quoted Bertolt Brecht contention that "art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it" — with "ART," in this collective's case, literally depicted as the hammerhead.

Certainly, an art that self-reflectively engages with and thus illuminates today's many crushing injustices is more necessary than ever. An art that also manages to engender beauty against the ugliness of the current social order is one of the few ways to point beyond the present, toward something that approximates a joyful existence for all.

But as capitalism intensifies its hold on social organization, not to mention our imaginations, efforts to turn art into an instrument of social change leave it all that much more open to simply mirroring reality rather than contesting or offering alternatives to it. And short of achieving even the imperfect horizontal experiments of places like Buenos Aires and Chiapas, much less replacing statecraft with confederated self-governments, attempts to make art into a community-supported public good remain trapped in the private sphere, however collectively we structure our efforts.*

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* I'd add other places now, like Rojava and Cherán. For an anthology of inspiring contemporary, real-life stories of self-governance, see Cindy Milstein, ed., *Deciding for Ourselves: The Promise of Direct Democracy* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2020).

thing which belonged to everybody, not just the real estate agents and the barons of big business. Imagine a city like that and stop leaning against the wall — it's wet."

Another example comes from installation artists Esther Shalev-Gerz and Jochen Gerz's attempt to deal with "'forgetting' in a place of 'remembering,' and thus establish, through the act of public participation, each person's memory." In 1986, they erected a twelve-meter-high lead column in a town square in Hamburg, Germany, and "invited passers-by to write their name on its surface." It became a "community board without restriction," and "mimicked the process of an ideal democracy — a public space open to unrestricted thought ... and all-encompassing dialogue." Over seven years, which included the fall of the Berlin wall, the column was slowly lowered into the ground as sections filled up. A debate ensued during that time over public space/art, and especially the Nazi past and neo-Nazi present. But as this disappearing "countermonument" was also meant to illustrate, "in the long run," according to Shalev-Gerz, "it is only we ourselves who can stand up against injustice."

To my mind, the best efforts are the ones that focus as much on horizontal social organization as on aesthetic questions, thereby highlighting the DIO art-as-commons dimension of anarchism that, again to my mind, really does distinguish an antiauthoritarian art. Writer Ursula Le Guin, for one, imagined a utopia where museums might function like libraries. The internet now facilitates open-source, interactive electronic museums. Other inklings of this can be found in those creative projects that play with, and work at, the notion of communal control of our now-privatized spaces and prefigure directly democratic, confederated social structures.

One compelling case study is the United Victorian Workers, Local 518, organized in late November 2005 by an artist/activist collective as a counterpoint to the Victorian Stroll in Troy, New York. The

with clear eyes, and envision and prefigure humane alternatives with even clearer eyes, that we might just win.

COLLECTIVELY GESTURING TOWARD UTOPIA

So how might we begin to clamber out of our boxed-in existence, precisely in order to "win," knowing that there will never be a final victory but simply better approximations of fundamentally transformed social relations?

One starting point might come from anarcha-feminist Emma Goldman, who in 1914 observed that modern art should be "the dynamite which undermines superstition, shakes the social pillars, and prepares men and women [*sic*] for the reconstruction." Another might be found with anarchist artist Clifford Harper, who noted of his 1974 "utopian images" posters that "they depict an existence that is immediately approachable." And yet another is hinted at by anarchist social theorist Murray Bookchin, who in 2004, reflecting on his imminent death, wrote, "To live without a social romance is to see without color. Imagine what life would be like in black and white, without being able to hear — to be deaf to music. Step by step our potentialities like hearing became organized sound, and the *Marseillaise* was born."

Other points of departure come from on-the-ground experimentation by contemporary artists, some anarchists and others not, that grapple with some of the concerns mentioned above. Such as provocateur street artist Banksy, who despite his fame and fortune, still managed (at the time this piece was originally written, at least) to question how present-day sovereigns maintain their control. Whether painting giant windows to a better world on the separation wall being erected by the Israeli government, or placing a life-size figure dressed in Guantanamo Bay orange within the scenery of a Disneyland ride, Banksy serves to startle, to act as a vigilant public eye. Moreover, he asks people to "imagine a city where graffiti wasn't illegal. ... A city that felt like a living breathing

Artistic expression is fettered by the present, from commodification to insidious new forms of hierarchy, and hence creativity is as estranged from itself as we are from each other.

Such alienation isn't limited to the aesthetic arena, of course. But precisely because creative "freedom" appears to defy any logic of control — in "doing-it-yourself" (DIY), one is supposedly crafting a culture that seems to be utterly of, for, and by us — it is especially seductive as a space of resistance. Our aesthetic tools should be able to help us build new societies just as much as demolish the old, but our renovations will likely be forever askew when set on an already-damaged foundation. And no matter how shoddily constructed, they will always be sold out from under us to the highest bidder. Still, we have to be able to nail down something of the possibilities ahead.

Art at its best, then, should maintain the dual character of social critic and social visionary. For the role of the critic is to judge, to discern, not simply beauty but also truth, and the role of the utopian is to strive to implement such possible impossibilities. As anarchist poet and art critic Sadakichi Hartmann put it in a 1916 *Blast* article, radical artists should "carry the torn flag of beauty and liberty through the firing lines to summits far beyond the fighting crowds."

This is perhaps art's greatest power, even when distorted by the present-day social order: the ability to envision the "not yet existent."

THE TEMPORARY AND THE TRASHED

Since the 1970s, a series of interconnected phenomena loosely drawn together by the term "globalization" have transformed the world. One of these changes is the rise of "global cities" as nodes of control, and over time, this has become embodied in the de-

signed/built aesthetic environment.* In *City of Quartz*, radical urban theorist Mike Davis wrote of the "fortress effect" behind a free market maneuver in the aftermath of the 1960s to reoccupy abandoned (read: poor because abandoned by capital, whites, and so on) downtowns. New megastructure complexes of reflective glass rose up in city centers, hiding elite decision-makers and their "upscale, pseudo-public spaces" inside. Several decades later, with global capitalism seemingly triumphant, brazenly transparent architecture is replacing secretive one-way windows. Just take a peek at the revitalized Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, Germany. Corporate office-apartment buildings of see-through glass reveal lavish interior designs, and are ringed by airy public plazas featuring cheerful sculptures, artsy ecological waterways, and multimedia installations.

Since anarchists today are by and large neither city planners nor architects, nor those commissioned to produce public art, we've had to make do with temporary festivals of resistance decrying the environment that's been built to constrain the majority of humanity. Such carnivals against capitalism have succeeded in fleetingly reclaiming everything from facades to landscapes to outdoor art. And in those moments, we have become impromptu designers of place. The preferred artistic medium here is flexibility, with a dab of anonymity. A large stick of chalk, a homemade stencil, or strips of cloth are easily concealed, and just as easily used to transform a sidewalk, wall, or fence into a canvas. In these and many other ways, anarchist artists set up the circus tent of a playful urban renewal, bringing glimpses of the pleasure in reworking social spaces together, of integrating form and content into the everyday-made-extraordinary by creative cultural expressions.

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* The term "global city" was first coined in Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

operates in specific ways right now, and can therefore be illustrated and potentially fought. Today's form of fragmentation, for example, has turned many toward fundamentalisms — within Islam, Judaism, or Christianity — as a means to regain community, often at the expense of women, queers, and indeed anyone dubbed as the transgressive other. Fear has an object, and in the contemporary United States that is frequently the young Black male or the bearded Middle Eastern man. Spatial displacement brutally creates immigrants and refugees, who then become targets of hate. You get the picture. Rather, you can paint, print, or perform the picture.

Lest I seem to be blaming artists for an inegalitarian world, or minimally for not doing enough to challenge it through their work, let me reiterate: I desire to encourage shifts in cultural production and cultural producers in order that both can contribute to the project of ever-freer societies. There are valid reasons for artistic choices — say, whether to sign a work or not — but all too often such choices seem already circumscribed or shaped by today's social ills. Art should instead aim to turn the tables: this miserable historical moment could be the raw material for artists to give shape to choices of our own construction — ones that might circumscribe domination.

As an anarchist whose creativity comes through the act of writing, I know all too well that penning words or printing a poster both become damaged in the context of a damaged world. And the world seems increasingly damaged at present. A lithographer friend recently told me, "I'm not making art right now, because I don't want to produce work that's nihilistic, and that's all I can feel these days." Despite these counterrevolutionary times, though, we must all try to work through our own fears and despair, in ways that allow our imaginations to run utopian. My hope is to instill hope in others by claiming that it is through our continual ability, together and alone, to understand and resist the emergent global order

should instead scrutinize and expose present-day mechanisms of power: how the mundane as well as the lovely — the bus to work, the toothpaste tube, or the nice new neighbor — are made into objects of anxiety-as-control; how explainable events become paranoiac fantasies of hate-as-control (the Muslim, the Jew, or the Mexican "is responsible"); and how one's private spirituality, sexuality, or diet (indeed, one's very personhood) become fair game as physical and psychological abuse in the faceless, nameless, hopeless Gitmoization of torture-as-control.

This list of aesthetic concerns could stretch out further, but let me wrap up with an area that art, from the start, has always tried to capture: remembrance. From bison hunts to biblical stories, from victories in battles or revolutions, from socialist realist to fascist art, artists have attempted to memorialize the past as a means to sustain or shape the present. At its best, such creative recollections have attempted to make sense of the past and the present in order to contemplate a better future — especially in the face of hegemonic representations. Strikingly, however, the current moment is marked by a reversal of aeons of art history: forgetting. Call it the postmodern condition, or blame it on the speed of daily life or efforts to escape harsh realities, but history seems to get lost almost before it's been made, and we're left with a hodgepodge art of immediatism. Such ahistoricism erases the developmental logic of domination and hence our ability to contest it, but also that of the revolutionary tradition and hence our capacity to nurture it, thereby helping to "disappear" hope. The artistic imperative here is simple: struggle against memory loss, including our own.

The above themes may seem amorphous; worse, they may appear to be completely removed from the many pressing, often life-and-death issues people face — the numerous "isms" that most of us battle, from racism to heterosexism to antisemitism, and sadly on and on. But it is through such concerns that, for instance, racism

On the other hand, when we've actually expropriated or "freed" spaces, we seem to re-create an aesthetic of deterioration in those places already destroyed by state and capital, racism and fear, almost reveling in the rubble. The degradation foisted on the poor, the marginal, and the forgotten is gleefully picked up as some sort of pirate sensibility. All too often, capitalism's trash is the blueprint for own trashed creations, as if artistic expressions modeled on a better, more visually pleasing world might just make us too comfortable to swashbuckle our way to revolution. Garbage, along with the shoplifted and the plagiarized, are all romanticized as somehow existing outside domination by anarchist artists who thoroughly inhabit a social structure (as does everyone) where the best of peoples' cultures are tossed aside, stolen, or plagiarized for profit and power.*

Whether conceived of as circus or chaos (or both), however, these types of civic artworks are as evanescent as the latest iPhone updates; they merely frolic on built environments instead of collec-

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* Obviously, many artists use free or discarded materials because they don't have the financial resources to buy art supplies, and hence their aesthetic can simply be chalked up to a lack of means. But also prevalent among anarchist artists is the notion that trash is valueless from the standpoint of capitalism, and so by utilizing such material, one is creating something of noncapitalist value. Or at least throwing capitalism's excess in its face as some sort of incriminating evidence. This reduces capitalism to economics, though, and ignores Karl Marx's great insight: that capital is first and foremost a social relation. Whether one uses expensive or free art supplies, the social organization behind them both remains the same. But of course, even on the level of economics, waste management is a multitrillion-dollar industry, utterly dependent on recycling and garbage. So whether you take a materialist or social theory perspective, a "cheap art" aesthetic is perfectly compatible with present-day forms of domination. Today's junk can easily become — and has — tomorrow's boutique item; society's rejects (from punks to urban Black youths) can become — and have — tomorrow's formula for hipster culture.

tively shaping them. Such artistic strategies are ultimately hollow, replicating the feeling of life under capitalism, whether one has material plenty or not. Instead of offering a challenge or a vision, both our joyful and joyless DIY art ends up parroting the bipolar "choices" that most people struggle against daily: the lure of the ephemeral, unattainable spectacle, or utter rejection in the debris of its excess. And yet this reopening of social space via creativity brings with it a sense of inclusiveness, of places remade and consented to by all — or at least the potentiality thereof.

Art as social critic/visionary, when doggedly and imaginatively placed in the commodified (non)commons of today, just might play its part in moving us toward a noncommodified commons: what we share and enjoy together, in the open, always subject to use by all, subject to directly democratic structures, and always the vigilant sentry of a better and better society.*

It's not that everyone needs to make art, nor should artists offer an aesthetic of revolt or a revolting aesthetic — that is, mere negation or else nihilism. That's not what makes art revolutionary. It's that everyone needs to routinely experience critical-utopian art as commons, commons as a critical-utopian art.

THE ART OF VALUE

To some degree, whether self-consciously or not, anarchists' artistic impulses get to the heart of what makes capitalism so deplorable. "Value" is determined by how much one has and can continually exchange as well as accumulate, whether in the form of money, property, or especially control over others. We anarchists, and billions of nonanarchists, know that value can never be measured by piling quantity on top of more quantity; that how we

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* Such a commons should imply thinking and acting side by side, beyond colonialism, borders, and other violent impositions.

as well as time-space compression, alienation, fragmentation, and of course top-down power.*

Which brings us to the question of maintaining power, or sovereignty: the possession of supreme authority. Wars, revolutions, and "peacetime" are all essentially waged in the name of seizing this ultimate power (with anarchists hoping to redistribute it horizontally), but the ongoing consolidation of sovereignty is where much of the terror is often done. An increasingly uneven balance of power is held in place today by nation-states inculcating a particular blend of fear, despair, paranoia, and hate, and if all else fails, returning once again to "improved" forms of torture as a last resort. Anarchist art frequently just pokes fun at anxieties, depicts its own hatreds and paranoia, or worse, lapses into portraying the ways that states retained control in the past — say, via a monopoly on violence (something that suicide bombings, 9-11, and other nonstatist acts of violence have shown to be false). Contemporary art

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* Josh MacPhee offered the following comment while editing the original version of this piece: "The trouble is that *Modern Times* is a better movie than *The Matrix*!" I agree. And given that it's perhaps harder than ever to make artwork that isn't degraded from the start, Josh asks, "What is an artist to do, simply accept that degradation? Is not the woodcut a harkening to a time when craft mattered, and therefore a rejection of the made-in-China [or made-in-the-USA] aesthetics?" Sure. But what Josh and I are both getting at is this, to quote him again: It is "no longer about what we do (with capitalist globalization, everyone has access to everything, so skateboarding, noise music, tall bikes, and silk screening become fodder for Coke ads), but how we do it. This is a deceptively simple idea, but it can be easily misunderstood. It does not mean that there is a 'correct' way to do things (that is, a way to move into a neighborhood and not gentrify); we are still beholden to the larger systems we exist in. But it does mean that the ethics of how we do things matters, for the very reason that they are at the core of the new world we are trying to build." I appreciate the dialogue Josh and Erik added to this chapter in the editing process — a good example of "how we do it."

A third area worthy of artistic scrutiny is what geographer David Harvey in his book *The Condition of Postmodernity* has called "time-space compression," pointing to "processes that so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves." Under globalization, temporality has become an ever-accelerating, just-in-time, simultaneous phenomenon, and spatial barriers have shrunk or even been overcome altogether. Yet anarchist art often still harks back to a nostalgic time-space of "before," clinging to archaic forms and/or content — the pastoral black-and-white woodcut, say. Here's an additional artistic aspiration, then: to interrogate the dizzying "no-time" and displacing "no-place" of our present virtual reality and real virtuality.

This dovetails with the dilemmas raised by high technologies and excessive consumption/waste. During the industrial era, artists such as filmmaker Charlie Chaplin showed the "little guy" being dragged through the gears of *Modern Times*, yet in our informational age, the computer now bypasses the cog as emblematic, and the "programmer guy" is pulled into The Matrix. Moreover, the new forms of production made possible by digital technologies have filled houses with kitsch, dumpsters with food, and big-box stores with clerks. One anarchist answer to technological/production shifts has frequently been to use garbage as art material — a decades-old artistic choice that has lost any bite (especially since most commodities are now junk to begin with), but more crucially is unfeeling in light of the millions who are forced to use garbage as architectural (and often eatable) material. Or else to supposedly avoid high tech — conveniently forgetting that nearly all commodities involve communications technologies in their design, production, distribution, and/or disposal. The task for artists here is to separate the wheat from the chaff: to critique the ways in which new types of technologies/production help facilitate, versus potentially diminish, pointless excess or new methods of exploitation

live our lives, and especially how we treat each other and the non-human world, is what matters.

As a political philosophy, anarchism thus aspires to the ongoing project of balancing individual subjectivity and social freedom — the qualitative dimensions of life — knowing that both are essential to the potentiality of the other. As a practice, anarchism engages in prefigurative politics, from forms of cooperation to institutions of self-organization. This is what makes and keeps us human, in the most generous sense. And such a project will be forever necessary, whether within, against, or beyond capitalism.*

One way that anarchists attempt to reclaim value is by carving out a cultural realm that allows everyone to participate, to be valued for what they can envision and/or create, and by redistributing the possibility of producing works of art through the use of affordable, accessible, of-a-place materials. We use what's at hand, often lend a hand to whoever wants to make art, and attempt to do this in ways that are substantively heterogeneous and inclusive. In isolation from the other realms of life — economics and politics, the social and the personal — and embedded within structures of domination and forms of oppression, however, the cultural effort to revalue value frequently reproduces the social system we oppose.

Examples abound here, sad to say. Puppets are among the easiest of targets, primarily because they became the poster kids for anti-

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* Contrast this to the project of anarchy qua primitivism, which is to somehow "forget" that we are imaginative, qualitative beings marked by our capacity for dialogue and hence reasoned actions, and instead "return" to passive receptacles foraging for our most basic needs, which seems to me exactly what capitalism and statecraft as forms of social organization strive to reduce us to. This is no digression: when we deny our very ability to think symbolically, the notion of art disappears too, not to mention us as humans along with it.

capitalist mobilizations at the turn of this century. Devising a cheap and collective manner to produce artistic expressions of resistance isn't problematic per se; such creations have allowed us to prefigure a better life even as we protest present-day horrors. But when puppets all start looking alike, whether filling the streets of Seattle or Hong Kong; when they are mass-produced from the same materials, in the same manner; when they are something eco-entrepreneurs can fund to both create the appearance of grassroots protest and turn radical notions into the most liberal of demands — then we are developing our own factory forms of creativity.* Those we mean to empower — the everyone-as-artist — become near-assembly-line workers. So even when the production is fun or done in an edgy warehouse space, the profound recognition (of self and society) that comes from the creative act is lost. Art and the artists become unthinking, cranking out copycat rip-offs of the latest political art trend.

The distribution and consumption of such works can become equally debased. At a convergence in Windsor, Canada, to challenge free trade agreements several years ago, a prominent puppetista angrily insisted that thousands of anticapitalists should pause their direct actions to watch her collective's street theater. "We're here to entertain you, and you need to stop and be entertained!"

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* As one example, some Vermont puppeteers, who certainly needed the money for their many unpaid political projects, were commissioned to produce a puppet show for the 2005 Montreal Climate Control Conference. Yet there were strings attached. The eco-capitalist who financed these puppets had his own agenda in mind: make the art look like a self-initiated activist protest, but keep the theme in line with his own reformist political point. (This isn't to say that these particular artists, and others like them, aren't also able to subvert the eco-capitalist's goal to some degree.)

Negri's formulation in their book *Empire*. That is, the social ills we're contesting have long since been superseded by even more horrific phenomena. As Hardt and Negri argue, we've been "outflanked by strategies of power." Our countermove, then, must be based on imminent critique, working through the internal logic of what we're scrutinizing toward its own undoing and alternative potentialities. It must be a critique of the "real by the possible," as philosopher Henri Lefebvre asserted in 1958.

One theme picked up and challenged by radical artists over a century ago was fragmentation, an emergent concern in their day. Now, social atomization is a fact of everyday life, and more frighteningly, is accepted and even celebrated. Contemporary artwork that portrays fragmentation only serves to mimic rather than decry our societal "breaking apart," precisely because the damage has already been done. So here comes one task for art: to depict resistance not to fragmentation per se, for mere description has lost all power of critique, but to illustrate how social acquiescence to it has become a valued commodity.

This ties into a related issue: alienation. Building on Karl Marx's work, avant-garde artists and intellectuals long ago moved the critique of alienation from (only) the realm of production to that of consumption, culminating most famously in the Situationist International's critique of everyday life and assertion of "all power to the imagination." Life had become a spectacle, with us as its passive spectators. Today, this estrangement has gone one step further in a globalizing cybersociety, where people eagerly join the spectacle as active actors in the vain hope of feeling life again — through such things as reality television, hot-dog-eating contests, and pieing prominent individuals — only to participate more thoroughly in their own removal from the world. And thus here's another aim for art: to capture the new forms of alienation that appear as active engagement, but that ultimately sap the very life out of us all.

The flow, of course, doesn't simply go in one direction. As "products" of the dominant culture, we also are influenced before we ever cut a stencil or edit a video. Without constant awareness, we almost unwittingly take up the project of this society of control, with its fragmentation, insecurity, and shallow infotainment. Social isolation is mirrored by an anarchist art that asserts its anonymity, where we willingly erase our own subjectivity, and its temporariness and flexibility, where we willingly give up accountability and connectedness. The contemporary state's evisceration of human and civil rights, with its move from "the rule of law" toward "the rule of lawlessness," is reflected in an aesthetic that exalts in its own outlaw status. The art of cartography allows radicals to map out the constant fear of being watched by, in turn, surveilling others. And much of what antiauthoritarian artists produce replicates the culture of distraction that keeps people from acting and thinking for themselves — such as documentaries without a narrative, or screen prints that reduce social conflict to "us" versus "them."

The artist-as-social-visionary has to peer hard to separate potentiality from peril right now. As autonomist Marxist Harry Cleaver commented in 1992 in relation to anarcho-communist Peter Kropotkin's method, "He had to seek out and identify, at every level, from the local workshop and industry to the global organization of the economy, signs of the forces of cooperation and mutual aid working at cross-purposes to the capitalist tendencies to divide all against all." Then and now, such cross-purposes are what gesture at "the future in the present," to again cite Cleaver, but discerning them isn't easy.

PROVIDING THE KEYS TO CLOSED DOORS

The artist-as-social-critic doesn't have to search far for subject matter these days, and yet many people seem to be "pushing against an open door," to borrow from Michael Hardt and Antonio

It certainly isn't enough to make sure that more and more people are cultural producers (or consumers of free art) — the anarchist version of DIY quantity piled on top of more DIY quantity, somehow adding up to a new society. Indeed, "the people" making art might mean that there is no art at all, for quantity can actually destroy quality. And without the qualitative dimension, there can be no appreciation of beauty or craft, or the self who crafted that beauty.

This Walmartization of resistance art — cheap, accessible, homogeneous, and everywhere — isn't the only conundrum we face. It is as hard for us, "even" as anarchists, as it is for "ordinary" people to resist the hegemonic forces at work: those dominant types of organization and ways of thinking that become naturalized, and hence almost unquestioned in a given time period. Perhaps the only bulwark against internalizing and thereby reproducing the current hegemonies we rebel against is our ability to simultaneously think critically and act imaginatively. Indeed, this is where anarchism as a political philosophy excels: in its ongoing suspicion of all phenomena as possible forms of domination, and its concurrent belief in nonhierarchical social relations and organization. This ethical impulse — to live every day as a social critic and social visionary — certainly infuses anarchist rhetoric. It also underscores all of those values that anarchists generally share: mutual aid, solidarity, voluntary association, and so on. But for even the most diligent among us, acting on these ethics is much trickier than holding them in our hearts or jotting them down in a mission statement.

A British anarchist historian recently asked me for a tour of Hope Cemetery in Barre, Vermont. In Barre's heyday, at the turn of the twentieth century, socialists and anarchists worked together in the granite industry, living and dying (often and too young) as those who made tombstones. These Italian immigrants built an anarchist library and later a labor hall, established a food co-op and art school, published newspapers such as *Cronaca Sovversiva* and

hosted speakers like Big Bill Haywood, and rabble-roused. Yet more than anything, they sculpted their communal aesthetics into the hard gray stones dotting the cemetery, a lasting commons to the good works of these radicals. "Look at the artisanal quality of each and every gravestone," to paraphrase my visitor. "This exemplifies the difference between the appeal of Marxism and anarchism back then. Factory workers could never see themselves in their work, but these stone carvers could recognize themselves in their designs; they could see their own potentiality."

Such recognition is the first step toward valuing our world, toward knowing we can self-manage the whole of our lives. But it can only come when our artisanal efforts are part of crafting a social beauty. This, in turn, can only be defined in the process of doing-it-ourselves (DIO), where we don't necessarily all produce art but we do all substantially participate in engaging with, debating, judging, and determining the place(s) of creative expression.* The qualitative would be that realm of social criticism and pleasure that comes in the full recognition of free selves within a free society.

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* As Erik Reuland (Ruin) noted in editing the original version of this piece, "Many people would also argue that the whole definition of art should be exploded, and many things traditionally considered crafts or trades could be viewed — and invested with the same value — as artistic practices. They're not necessarily asserting that everyone can and should draw, write songs, and so on." Such a debate is complex, but at the risk of overgeneralizing for my present purposes, the notion that art's definition should encompass much more, and many more people could thus be considered artists, seems to often so water down what we mean by art and artists as to make both unrecognizable. Why does this matter? Precisely because of the concern articulated here about the recognition of our selves and each other as profoundly individuated humans, with wonderfully differing artistic and nonartistic things we might choose to excel in, embedded in a profoundly articulated community of our own ongoing self-determination.

WORKING AT CROSS-PURPOSES

The creative act — the arduous task of seeing something other than the space of colonialism, capitalism, statism, the gender binary, fascism, and other rooms without a view — is the hope we can offer to the world. Such aesthetic expressions must also aim to denaturalize the present, though. And this dual "gesturing at and beyond" will only be possible if we continually interrogate this historical moment, and whether our artworks are working against the grain within that context.

For the pull of the culture industry is strong. No matter how subversive and cutting-edge we might remain in our creative works, global capitalism is always ready to recuperate our every innovation. Our rebellious ad busting has become indistinguishable from advertisements employing rebellion-as-sales-pitch. For instance, just after Seattle 1999, an ad featured protesters running in their Nike sneakers from tear gas and police, with the familiar "just do it" tagline; yet it was unclear whether this image was the brainchild of Nike or activists — and either way, it didn't matter. It sold a lifestyle; it mocked a movement.

Creative work and/or processes of collective art-making without an explicit politics that integrally and forever vigilantly incorporates critical thinking into its practice will almost necessarily, especially under the current conditions, become part of the problem. Some of this will be clear, as when our freely traded handmade patches become the inspiration for prefabricated "made-in-China" clothing in pricey boutiques. The less-obvious manifestations are more troubling: when the DIY sensibility itself, so key to anarchist artistic creations, slowly but surely ingratiates itself into multiple mainstream commodities, from Home Depot's "You Can Do It" to the new Oreo kits that allow the consumer to "make" their own, with cookie tops and cream separated.